

GRAPE ROOTSTOCK BREEDER HIRED AT PGRU

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by John Zakour

GENEVA, NY: Peter S. M. Cousins has joined the USDA-ARS Plant Genetic Resources Unit (PGRU) at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, as a plant geneticist and grape rootstock breeder.

"Rootstock needs from across America's grape producing regions appeals to me," said Cousins. "In the position I now occupy, I will be able to contribute to American viticulture through advancing grape rootstock knowledge and improving varieties."

Cousins, whose degree is in genetics but whose training is in plant breeding, finds the many aspects of grape rootstock improvement fascinating and challenging. His goals with his new program are to establish rootstock trials in California and New York; plant rootstock breeding blocks in those states including commercial and elite varieties; make crosses; and establish colonies of grape-pathogenic nematodes and insects. He also has begun planning and constructing a new greenhouse.

Cousins has ambitious goals for the future. "Within five years I hope to be planting rootstock trials with selections from crosses made this spring. Rootstock trials planted this year will be producing, and data collection will be underway. Fundamental knowledge on aspects of root-knot nematode resistance and host specificity, and fan-leaf virus resistance mechanisms will have been revealed."

"We are delighted Peter decided to join PGRU," said Warren Lamboy, PGRU research leader of PGRU. "He brings to the unit a rare combination of a broad knowledge of the grape



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industry and the ability to rapidly establish experiments and research collaborations. Peter has demonstrated the desire and ability to improve grape rootstock selections using the most appropriate tools and technologies."

Hugh Price, chairman of Cornell University's horticultural sciences department at Geneva, where Cousins has a courtesy assistant professor appointment, said, "The Station is extremely fortunate to have Peter Cousins located on our campus. His interest and background in plant breeding, grapes and rootstocks will complement several Geneva programs."

Cousins received his B.S. in Biological Sciences in 1994 from Stanford University and his Ph.D. in Genetics from the University of California, Davis, in 1999. His dissertation was on the genetics of resistance to *Meloidogyne incognita* in crosses of grape rootstocks. Cousins developed a new and more efficient assay system for evaluation of grape rootstock resistance to root-knot nematode (*M. incognita*), and using it, found significant differences between grape varieties with respect to their nematode resistance. While at Davis, he served as a teaching assistant for classes in viticulture practices and plant breeding. He has published numerous papers on the genetics of grapes and grape rootstocks.

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